

The Role of Corporate Social Responsibility Information in the Consumer-Brand Relationship

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Abstract

Given the increased interest and empirical research in corporate social responsibility (CSR) and irresponsibility (CSI), the interest of this paper is given to the impacts of corporate operational performance (COP) and corporate social performance (CSP) on consumer brand advocacy and brand trust. In this consumer-brand continuum, customers evaluate brand trustworthiness by two scopes: (1) the product or service the firm offers (i.e., product brand) that is usually associated with COP (Rust, Moorman, & Dickson 2002); and (2) the firm which provides the products and services (i.e., corporate brand) that is connected with CSP (Korschun, Bhattacharya, & Swain 2014). In addition, consumer response to brand trust and brand advocacy will be moderated by product involvement.

The objective of this study is to add to the body of empirical research in CSR by demonstrating that (1) compared with CSP, for instance, COP information on qualities and traits about high involvement products may elicit stronger brand affects; (2) the valence of CSR information has a directionally consistent effect on brand evaluation; (3) the exposure of CSR-COP may strengthen consumer brand advocacy, such as purchase intention, evaluation of the corporation, and WOM communications, etc., especially when the brand is in the high involvement product categories; and (4) when consumers look at low involvement products, CSR-CSP becomes more diagnostic than COP information for brand evaluation and advocacy.

A 2 (COP: CSR-COP vs. CSI-COP) \times 2 (CSP: CSR-CSP vs. CSI-CSP) \times 2 (Involvement: high vs. low) between-subject design was adopted to examine the above research objectives. A total of 326 commerce major undergraduate students were recruited. A fictitious company producing juices was used as the low involvement product category and another fictitious company manufacturing TV sets was used as the high involvement product category.

The results suggest that as the different roles of CSP and COP in the diagnosticity and judgment, such type of positive information consistently influence brand advocacy in the same direction. However, as the level of uncertainty and perceived risks are different between low and high involvement products, the nature of CSP and COP information seems to be a better predictor of brand trust for high than low

involvement products. Compared with low involvement products consumers probably weigh quality and reliability of products or services more important than other dimensions for high involvement products. Combining these judgments into a summary construct, brand trust, consumers use it as an indication of expected future performance.

Furthermore, the moderating effect of involvement on CSR and customer-brand relationship suggests that individual current attitude serves as the reference framework to categorize received information based on this framework. According to the social judgment theory, involvement moderates the effects on consumer attitude (Wang & Lee 2005). In the current study, individuals were more likely to employ COP information for high involvement product while CSP had a strong interference effect on brand advocacy for low involvement product.

This research has several implications for contemporary marketing management. First, this paper provides information about which product categories would be more appropriate for utilizing different categories of corporate social responsibility practices from the consumer viewpoint. Especially given the competitive situation in the business world, the powerful electronic WOM in the online community would be an effective means of communicating such corporate support of social issues with the public. Thus, buzz marketing would be a good option for the company marketing a publicly visible product. Second, companies in different product categories should make cause-related marketing a powerful tool to break through advertising clutter, generate publicity, and foster consumer preference for both the promoted brand and associated brands (Brown & Dacin 1997, Andrews et al. 2014).

References

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and

Practitioners: Huang (2015) provides future research and application for buzz marketing and cause-related marketing strategy development in terms of the impacts of different types of corporate social information on corporate brand equity building.

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